Abstract: This essay briefly examines the British military and their decline as a world military leader between 1919-1939. During this period one could argue that naiveté clouded the lens through which they viewed military power in general in relation to other nations causing miscalculations in particular with regard to strategic policy considerations. We can contrast their lens then with our lens today as we transition from major military engagements to minimal engagements while balancing strategic prudence with fiscal limitations. Although the context is not exactly the same, the consequences of miscalculated policy decisions following World War I provide useful causal lessons worth further consideration. Those lessons do not entirely regard the effect of restraints directly on the military, rather they regard potential blind spots that might be either missed or neglected.

By 1919 the body politic in Britain lacked the stomach to endure the physical cost of another Great War. They also could no longer financially afford it. This aversion transcended social attitudes to political and military policies to the extent that the British government definitively forecasted a ten year period in which, "the British Empire will not be engaged in any great war…and that no Expeditionary Force is required for this purpose."[1] Through the 1920s and 1930s, protecting British fiscal interests outweighed protecting potential security interests. Consequently Britain’s weakened will for security translated into policy constraints limiting revolutionary technological advances which compelled the nation’s leaders to withdraw into a protective posture of traditionalism and isolationism that resisted relevant change. Specifically Britain implemented broad reductions in defense, followed protectionist policies that ignored the European situation, and she stagnated in terms of doctrine development as a result of hopeful assumptions.

Politically the government, which was influenced by the body politic, became fed up with war and a military at war. The society was discouraged with a military that seemingly let the public down.[2] Burdened by war debt and the industrial toll to foreign trade and the cost of maintaining the Empire, the government sought to significantly limit military expenditures.[3] Even by 1933 the economy and overall financial health of the nation consumed the British government. From 1919 through the 1930s, the economy remained the single greatest priority, so much so that other hypothetical threats were calculated as necessary risks.[4] In spite of recognizing a growing deficit in terms of naval capabilities compared to German and Japanese power, the emphasis remained restoring fiscal matters. Britain, "considered the financial risk greater than the war risk."[5] Fundamentally, despite the possibility of a growing German threat, Britain determined to maintain a security strategy aimed at restoring economic strength vice military strength.

This economic strategy was evident by the prioritization of colonial interests. Doing so meant that the military's role was to secure those foreign interest particularly in the East, Southwestern Asia, and the Middle East.[6] In Cabinet discussions the recommended primary function of both air and ground forces
emphasized garrisons in territories under British control.[7] Protecting against possible threats from major countries such as Germany and Russia took a back seat to protecting Imperial economic interests. This policy extended even through 1936 when British officials began taking a more serious look at the policies' limiting effects.[8] Until then the Territorial Army took priority over the Regular Army.[9] By 1938, the consequence was such that an emerging German military threat proved potentially unmanageable given the comparative state of British versus European forces.[10]

As for the Navy, her role would similarly be one of protecting those mercantile interests. Therefore, the use of a Navy as a predominantly economic security measure required only minimal construction of new ships and maintained only what was truly necessary for keeping lines of communication open.[11] This affected further British developments in emerging aircraft carrier technology and submarine warfare, the latter of which the British outright rejected.[12] Britain's persistence in pursuing negotiated disarmament treaties exemplified her notions of peace through limiting a country's capital ship strength. Although disarmament negotiations were acknowledged by other great naval powers, the tenor of British proposals indicated confusion regarding the strategic calculation of reducing capital ships, namely aircraft carrier tonnage. In a 1927 report to the Cabinet Committee on Policy, officials consider the matter, "unfortunate that the few big naval Powers cannot agree amongst themselves on the naval question."[13] Unfortunate was British naiveté in this regard, that the big naval powers would consider British proposals as lending collectively to individual state security. Allan Millet points out that countries did not truly seek alliances with each other, as Britain intended, thereby diverging from each others' strategic military aims.[14] This would then suggest that Britain miscalculated naval reductions on account of other nations doing the same.

Britain's opposition to the submarine was also singular; no other major naval power concurred with British proposals to completely abolish the submarine.[15] Her impression of the submarine following World War I was that it served little to no purpose as an efficient means to protect a nation. Specifically, it was seen as unusually cruel and potentially difficult to control.[16] Furthermore, the submarine was argued to be a politico-military instrument for desperate nations.[17] In other words, their use by civil societies represented an unnecessary tactic given that alternative surface ships were equally destructive. Again, only Britain held this view; other major naval powers valued the efficacy of submarine warfare and sought to advance their use. This departure of thought is arguably one of the more visible examples of British policy limiting military innovation and growth. Thus, military leaders turned inward to protect traditional institutional norms rather than focusing outward at advances by peer competitors.

However their introspection proved ineffective essentially perpetuating the ossification of World War I doctrine. Coupled with a reluctance to foresee emerging peer threats on account of the ten year rule, Britain failed to closely examine her military lessons learned until 1932.[18] Contrarily, Britain's looming enemy, Germany, underwent a serious and very close examination of her failures during the Great War. Dr. William Kautt, notes they (Germans) were "minutely dissecting…in painstaking detail" German successes and failures and implementing innovation from those examinations.[19] This failure on the part of Britain was further exacerbated by military leaders who went so far as to punish innovation. Specifically, Field Marshall Alan Brooke prevented innovators of armored warfare from reaching senior positions, an obvious attempt to thwart changes to the status quo.[20]

Moreover, this reluctance inhibited constructive thought in the military education system. Williamson Murray points out that the staff college did little to challenge students.[21] Particularly, he notes that it avoided learning about the tactics used during World War I. Failing to capitalize on those lessons stagnated the development of new doctrine to match advances in air, naval, and ground technologies. By the end of World War I Britain led the world in these areas, notably in the development of tank warfare. However, competing demands to reconstitute the economy and focus on Imperial efforts beyond the
homeland, forced Britain to balance the cost versus the benefit of an emphasis on such matters as armored vehicles. Allan Millet considers this a symptom of victimization of these factors stagnating military ground doctrine. This author also considers British reluctance to develop an innovative ground doctrine a factor of her misplaced assumption that no major threat would come from Europe or any major power for at least ten years following the war. Adhering to the ten-year rule and furthermore resetting the rule into the mid 1920s, they forestalled the opportunity to compete in the development race.

By early 1936, British military leaders began scrambling to meet an impending threat against predominantly German military strength. Britain realized rather late, that disarmament and minimal defense policies were not sufficient for what was finally perceived as a credible threat to the homeland. War Office memoranda and other Cabinet minutes reveal that dire warnings predicted an inability to confront the German threat. What Britain realized was that she was well more than ten years behind in terms of technological advances, a stark contradiction to her hopeful calculations in 1919. This forced Britain to recalculate the cost-benefit of fiscal security over state security. Unfortunately for Britain, the ensuing few years of further debate would neither provide enough time nor political capital to surge military restructuring and construction.

Heading into 1939 and Germany's offensive attacks, Britain lacked the preparedness she had coming out of World War I. As Millet suggests, Britain's inward policies helped cause her to lose the advantage against peer competitors. The body politics' will for war was weakened by the costly outcome of World War I. This translated into miscalculated policy constraints to emphasize fiscal interests and forego security threats. Doing so limited British technological advances particularly at sea and in ground and armored warfare. Her protection of traditionalism and the status quo, encouraged a military to resisted relevant change. Unfortunately failing to learn lessons was a major lesson Britain finally learned too late.


According to Dr. Kautt (p. 44), the British public viewed the military as having succeeded in failing in several areas most poignantly, "they proved inept on the modern battlefield."

[3] The August 15, 1919 minutes refer to a return to pre-war standards governing the size of the Navy and for Navy and Army/Air Force expenditures to reduce to £60million and £75million respectively.

[4] British Cabinet 9. "Meeting of the Cabinet held on February 15, 1933." Conclusions of Meeting Cabinet 9 on February 15, 1933. London: The National Archives United Kingdom Catalogue Reference: CAB/23/75, February 15, 1933. Minutes from a Cabinet 9 meeting held on February 15, 1933 show that as far as naval estimates indicate, the focus of the government would remain the economy. Page 6 references a memorandum by the Treasury in which it was stated, "financial and economic risks are by far the most serious and urgent that the country has to face, and that other risks must be run until the country
has had time and opportunity to recuperate and our financial situation to improve."

[5] Ibid.


[7] See Minutes of War Cabinet meeting August 15, 1919. The stated "principal function of the military and Air Force" was to "provide garrisons for India, Egypt…” and other "territory under British control."

[8] Cabinet 75. "Meeting of the Cabinet on 16 December 1936." *Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet held on 16 December 1936*. London: The National Archives: retrieved from http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/themes/defence-policy-1933-1939.htm#Army%20plans, December 16, 1936. Reference pp. 13 and following - Officials began to realize that the previous function of the Army, "to maintain garrisons overseas…to provide the military share in Home Defence [sic], including Anti-Aircraft Defence [sic]…to provide a properly equipped force ready to proceed overseas” was not sufficient against a German aggressor.

[9] Ibid.

[10] For more on Chamberlain's restricting funding of Regular Army forces which consequently placed the country's security at risk, see Murray p. 11. He notes that War Office was warning Chamberlain of the danger of limiting the army's funding.


her intent was to at least reduce tonnage.

[16] Ibid.


[19] See Kautt, p. 43 for more on the comparison between German examination and British failure to examine their lessons following World War I.

[20] See Murray p. 29. Murray notes that Field Marshal Alan Brooke prevented the placement of those innovators at the "division level and above."

[21] See Murray pp. 23-24 for more on how the British military system failed to capitalize on valuable lessons learned during World War I.

[22] See Allan Millet in Murray and Millet, p. 345. He discusses British military thought as being trapped in its inability to institutionalize innovation and experimentation.

[23] Throughout the various Cabinet meeting minutes and notes, one notices a re-mentioning of the ten year rule as if it did not have a specific expiration date which should have been 1929. We see, however, that even into 1925 the discussions refer to the rule as if were presently reinstated.

[24] See Cabinet 75 meeting conclusions regarding the role of the British Army. There was a lengthy discussion about the readiness of Regular Army compared to Territorial Army forces against a potential German invasion on France. The crux of the discussion revealed that in 1936 Britain was unprepared to thwart an attack because of its policy of prioritizing Territorial interest.


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